

Sermon for Pentecost 13 – August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Pastor Russell Britton

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

*1 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. 2 And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods.*

*14 "Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." 16 Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; 17 for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; 18 and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God."*

Ephesians 6:10-20

*10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15 As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16 With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18 Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. 19 Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.*

John 6:56-69

*[Jesus said,] 56 "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." 59 He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.*

*60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" 61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65 And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."*

*66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67 So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" 68 Simon Peter answered him, "**Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.** 69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."*

*“Difficult Choices”*

This same God who has accompanied us and protected us, delivering us to this very day is a Mighty Fortress in our lives. But do we always choose to see God that way? Both the Joshua and Ephesians readings draw out that by turning to God we will receive deliverance and protection. But this Gospel text for this Sunday names the response to Jesus’ teachings and we find that in light of what Jesus recently said, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” (John 6:66) So what makes us steadfast in our following? From the Lutheran catechism we ascribe our coming to belief as the work of the Holy Spirit but in our thinking and our doubts and our willpower, what gets in your way?

There are two terms in this dialogue that we do well to unpack to help our understanding. When the disciples say the teaching is difficult, this word *skleros* has connotations not of abstraction or difficulty in comprehension but rather harsh, challenging, or unpleasant. It is interesting to note that the following question ‘who can accept it?’ poses the decision of resolve among those gathered disciples. They are already unsure of their capacity to persevere! Jesus then, aware of their troubled sentiment, asks ‘Does this offend you,’ which really is, as the verb *skandalizo*, alternatively rendered, can be the same as asking does this make you stumble (as in to place a snare or trap) or make you sin.<sup>1</sup> When John upholds belief in God as the primary function of relationship, to *not* believe in Jesus is the main sin. So where something, someone, or some practice obstructs devotion one must reflect on what makes them stumble and fall out of belief.

Oh that we so readily *chose* not to sin. But in order to do so, in as much as it is within our capacity, would require nourishment not only of our person but also of our souls. Let us ponder the life and nourishment coming from our present practices.

This very act of reflection will likely turn us to look at difficult choices we face. “The language of “choice” resonates with the larger theme of this Gospel that those who encounter Jesus are put in a

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, Rev. Dr. Karoline M. John. *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN. 2014. 97. Additionally drawn from discussion on [http://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast\\_id=656](http://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=656)

position of choice, a position of crisis, decision, and therefore judgment.... The issue of choice, of coming to belief in Jesus, is essentially about relationship. True relationship is mutual and reciprocal.”<sup>2</sup>

And I plan to address our relationship with God through our belief, but first, let me share a marvelous summary passage I found on whether this Gospel text is explicitly about the sacrament. Again Gerard Sloyan in his preaching commentary shared: “Pulpit polemic on whether there is or is not a sacramental understanding here is out of place, if only because the fathers of the church were not fully agreed on the question. Neither were the fathers of the Council of Trent, for that matter. The Alexandrian spirit tended to see the whole chapter as a parable of faith in Christ, but various Latin and Greek Fathers were inclined to the Eucharistic interpretation. ... Consequently, anyone who maintains publicly that any segment of this chapter bears but a single interpretation blunders through a *misplaced certitude*....The evangelist John is so *consciously polyvalent* in his symbolism that we impoverish him when we settle for one understanding of his words.”<sup>3</sup>

We are clearly called to ‘feed on Jesus’ so perhaps your difficult choice is how? Here are some thoughts from Dr. Ralph Wilson on that: “To feed on the Bread of Life is to believe Jesus’ words and trust in him as the source of our life. To eat Jesus’ flesh and blood means to utterly depend on him and the truths he teaches for sustenance and life itself.”<sup>4</sup> “Feeding on Jesus’ words and basking in his presence are the essence of trust, of true belief in him. Yes, partake of his body and blood in the Lord’s Supper as a sign that you indeed feed on him in your heart – and so grow in your faith.”<sup>5</sup> God’s steadfast presence of God’s self to us is representative in our closing song, Abide With Me.

The feeding that takes place sustains and uplifts our belief, which leads me to return to thoughts about how relationship is involved in our life of faith. God is in relationship not only with you, but also with the person sitting next to you in the pew.

“It is important to note that what Jesus has revealed in this discourse, which is found to be difficult and ultimately rejected, is not predictions of suffering and death but visions of eternal life.

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis, Rev. Dr. Karoline M. *John*. *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN. 2014. 102.

<sup>3</sup> Sloyan, 74-75.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, Dr. Ralph F. found at [http://www.jesuswalk.com/lords-supper/8\\_john6.htm](http://www.jesuswalk.com/lords-supper/8_john6.htm) Pg. 9

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, Dr. Ralph F. found at [http://www.jesuswalk.com/lords-supper/8\\_john6.htm](http://www.jesuswalk.com/lords-supper/8_john6.htm) Pg. 9

Perhaps there is only so much of a good thing we can take.”<sup>6</sup> I particularly resonated with this last quote because of Peter’s confession that Jesus’ words are indeed words of eternal life. *They give what they promise. And when you are faced with choosing to believe that, say in the trying times of at a loved one’s bedside, my how the words of Jesus meet you and require of you whether you will lean in to them.* Saying the Lord’s Prayer several times this week during hospital visits turned me to look at those words closely and what they profess and what they help us to see.

May we see in bread and wine, Jesus’ body and blood and feast on the promises that our Lord imparts on behalf of our heavenly Father. May we see each other as living relationships that turn us toward one another in hearing the words of eternal life. There are difficult choices in life, to be sure, but when you know who Jesus is, along with Peter may we boldly choose to proclaim, “Lord, to whom shall we go?”

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis, 101.